

# What is a University For?

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Anthony T. Kronman. *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. Yale University Press. 320 pages. \$27.50

For at least 20 years, since the publication in 1987 of Allan Bloom's surprise bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, conservatives have seemed to own the critique of our universities and the defense of liberal education. That progressives and left-liberals have largely stood idly by as professors have politicized liberal education and as universities have betrayed their obligation to furnish and refine students' minds is a sign of complacency, confusion, and complicity.

In part to overcome the complacency, confusion, and complicity, Anthony T. Kronman makes a powerful case for the rededication of our colleges and universities, taking account of changed circumstances, to their original mission. Kronman brings formidable credentials to his task. Now Sterling Professor of Law at Yale Law School, he served as dean of the Law School for ten years, until his second term ended in 2004. He is the author of *The Lost Lawyer* (Harvard University Press, 1993), which examines the traditional virtues and goods connected to a life in the law and their demotion by the legal academy and corporate law practice. Before that he published *Max Weber* (Stanford University Press, 1983), a study of the legal dimensions of the great social scientist's thought. He holds both a law degree and a Ph.D. in philosophy; he established his scholarly name writing about the law of contracts; and, having made his academic home for the past 30 years or so at Yale Law School, he could regularly be found offering ambitious and unconventional classes with tempting titles such as "The Tyranny of Reason" (a class I was fortunate to take as a law student in the late 80s). When he left the Dean's office in 2004, Kronman took the remarkable step of choosing to teach freshmen in Yale's great-books-based Directed Studies Program.

Kronman's eloquent book does not disappoint. Although it barely notes the contributions of Bloom, Roger Kimball, Dinesh D'Souza, and many others, mostly conservatives, who have kept the argument alive, it makes a substantial contribution in its own right to the important debate about liberal education that they set in motion. The highlight of Kronman's book is a compelling reconstruction of the moral and intellectual sources of the culture of political correctness, coupled with an incisive analysis of the severe damage political correctness has visited upon the humanities. To properly appreciate the full power of Kronman's critique of political correctness, it is necessary to place it in the context of his larger philosophical and historical argument.

Kronman begins with a question about a question: “Why did the question of what living is for disappear from the roster of questions our colleges and universities address in a deliberate and disciplined way?” But before he undertakes to give an account of its disappearance from university education, Kronman explains the question’s importance.

The question of what living is for is not one that all people inevitably ask, but it is always implicit in our lives. We cannot escape lesser questions: Should I go to the ballgame or volunteer at the soup kitchen? How do I show loyalty to my friends and respect for my parents? Should I marry for love or for money or not marry at all? Should I accept or reject my faith’s teachings about God’s commandments, or wrestle with some other faith, or embrace atheism? If we press — as we rarely do — even the humble questions we confront in our daily lives and follow the argument where it leads, we eventually confront the question of the purpose and value of life. Or, from a slightly different angle, we cannot avoid caring about a multiplicity of goods — our appearance, our jobs, our reputations, our beloveds, our friends and family, our community and nation — and establishing priorities among them. The inevitable effort to bring order to the things we care about raises, though it does not compel us to answer, the question of what we most care about and why — or, again, what is living for? The all-important question, seemingly remote from everyday life but implicated, whether we like it or not, in our routine choices and decisions, can be dodged and ignored, ridiculed and denied, but its roots in ordinary experience cannot be eradicated.

It was once thought that the aim of university education was to give students an opportunity, after they had reached young adulthood but before they shouldered the full array of adult responsibilities, to explore the purpose and value of life. Within living memory,

many college and university teachers, especially in the humanities, believed they had a responsibility to lead their students in an organized examination of this question and felt confident in their authority to do so. They recognized that each student’s answer must be his or her own but believed that a disciplined survey of the answers the great writers and artists of the past have given to it can be a helpful aid to students in their personal encounter with the question of what living is for — indeed, an indispensable aid, without which they must face the question not only alone but in disarray.

For at least 30 years, the humanities, that part of the university deputized to provide instruction in the purpose and value of life, has abandoned this responsibility. Humanities professors lost interest in the question of the good life and lost confidence in the ability to provide authoritative guidance in answering it, Kronman argues. He attributes this loss of interest and confidence to two interrelated historical developments: the rise of the research ideal in the last third of the nineteenth century and the ravages over the past 30 years of political correctness.

For more than two centuries, from the founding of Harvard College in 1636 to the decades following the end of the Civil War, American colleges saw their mission as providing instruction in the ends of human life. Since colleges thought they knew what the best life was, and since instruction proceeded on dogmatic assumptions grounded in Christian faith, Kronman calls this period “the age of piety.” The curriculum derived from the “classicist tradition.” It was fixed from beginning to end and drew heavily on the Greek and Roman authors. By the early part of the nineteenth century, colleges had introduced into the curriculum astronomy, geology, chemistry, political economy, and Enlightenment philosophy, but the spirit in which professors conducted their courses remained steady. Faculty regarded themselves first and foremost as teachers and saw no sharp separation between classroom studies and moral education.

In the years following the end of the Civil War, a new understanding of higher education took hold in the United States. Under the influence of the modern German university, long-established American colleges and newly created American universities alike increasingly embraced “the research ideal.” Instead of putting the education of students at the center of the university’s mission, the research ideal gave pride of place to original scholarship and the production of knowledge. This shift shook the intellectual underpinnings of the classicist tradition. For the research ideal assumed that knowledge was progressive, valued creativity over devotion to tradition and, through the explosion in scholarship it set off, undermined the old belief that a single individual could master the main areas of human learning. These changes, combined with the growing sense in nineteenth-century America that the ends of a human life were plural not singular and that reasonable people could differ about the role of faith in a good human life, transformed higher education. Faculty increasingly wished to teach courses and design curricula that reflected their specialized research interests. And this desire fit conveniently with the increasingly common belief that students were in the best position to choose those among the proliferating variety of courses offered by the university that best suited their interests and ambitions.

The advent of the research ideal put pressure on the study of the ends of human life but did not banish it altogether. For almost 100 years, such study found refuge in the humanities. There it was protected, but also revised, by another new ideal that emerged in the aftermath of the Civil War. Kronman calls it “secular humanism,” and his book is devoted to rescuing it. This ideal overlaps considerably with Mill’s high modern liberalism — and so will be familiar to readers of Isaiah Berlin’s writings on liberty — but in the end it owes most to Max Weber, particularly in the rigid strictures Kronman advances about the unreasonableness of faith and the disenchantment of the world.

Secular humanism, according to Kronman, rests on three assumptions. First, the multiplicity of human ends “is compatible with, indeed presupposes, the existence of a common human nature.” Second, this multiplicity is limited. History teaches that there are a number of recurring patterns or types — “the life of the warrior, for example, and of the thinker, the artist, the lover, the scientist, the politician, the priest.” And it is the task of the humanities to

introduce students to these fundamental alternatives through careful study of great works of history, literature, art, and philosophy so that they will be in a better position to fashion for themselves a life that reflects their own talents and aspirations. Third, although the belief that human beings operated in a divinely ordered universe could no longer serve as a common ground of inquiry, neither was it true that people could create their own meanings out of whole cloth. Accordingly, secular humanism “emphasized our dependence on structures of value larger and more lasting than those that any individual can create. ” And “it stressed the need for individuals to locate themselves within these structures as a condition of their leading purposeful lives. ”

The “deeper truth,” Kronman insists, is that “the humanities destroyed themselves by abandoning secular humanism in favor of the research ideal, which for a century and a half now has been gaining ground.”

With these significant modifications in philosophical underpinnings, the humanities carried on the classicist tradition’s commitment to studying the ends of human life. Instead of presenting students with a single right answer, the new humanities sought to acquaint students with the variety of worthy answers. And for about 100 years they did so until humanities professors, weakened by the internalization of the research ideal, succumbed to the culture of political correctness.

To be sure, “the turmoil of the 1960s and the resulting politicization of American academic life” proved a destructive force in higher education. Yet the “deeper truth,” Kronman insists, is that “the humanities destroyed themselves by abandoning secular humanism in favor of the research ideal, which for a century and a half now has been gaining ground as the principal arbiter of authority and prestige in American higher education. ” Kronman is certainly persuasive that humanities professors’ embrace of the research ideal sapped their enthusiasm for guiding students’ inquiry into questions about the best life. But his own brilliant account in the book’s fourth chapter of the origins and effects of political correctness makes clear that if the research ideal deflected humanities professors from their role in keeping alive the ideal of secular humanism, political correctness nevertheless dealt the ideal a crushing blow.

To conservative critics, political correctness is an unmitigated catastrophe. To progressives, it is a vast exaggeration. To Kronman, it represents “a new set of ideas” that arose in the 1970s, had roots in morally respectable convictions and intellectually respectable opinions, and, taken to extremes by humanities professors, poisoned higher education.

The new set of ideas comprises diversity, multiculturalism, and constructivism. On the one hand, “each draws its appeal from a feature it shares with secular humanism, which also acknowledges the diversity of human values and the need to construct one’s life by making a choice among them.” On the other hand, the culture of political correctness has done more than throw the humanities into a state of crisis. “They are in danger of becoming a

laughingstock,” declares Kronman, “both within the academy and outside it. Looking to build a new home for themselves, they have instead dug a hole and pitched themselves to its bottom. ”

Take, for example, the case of diversity. Commitment to it, Kronman points out, is an outgrowth of the 1960s civil rights movement. Diversity acquired talismanic status in higher education as a result of the Supreme Court ’s 1978 decision, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, which held that universities could not use race in admissions in order to correct for injustice — slavery, Jim Crow, and persisting private racial prejudice. But universities could use race as a factor, the Court suggested, to advance educational goals. The Court highlighted diversity.

Although still motivated by a desire to advance social justice, proponents of affirmative action quickly adopted the Court ’s diversity rationale, arguing anew for affirmative action on the grounds that it improved the quality of higher education. Humanities professors in particular — but also, though Kronman doesn’t mention it, large numbers of law professors, whose discipline, after all, comes closer than the other professions ’ to the humanities — avidly contended that African Americans, and eventually ethnic minorities and women, brought distinctive experiences and perspectives to the classroom. Never mind that such a contention justifies the presence at the university of blacks, minorities, and women as an instrument for the education of others. Kronman goes further, stressing that the diversity rationale denies the very possibility of free inquiry to which secular humanism and liberal learning are dedicated:

The belief that diversity is a pedagogical value starts with race and with the claim that race is an important and appropriate criterion for the selection of texts and teaching methods. By endorsing this claim the humanities helped to strengthen the legal and political case for affirmative action. But their enthusiastic affirmation of a deep connection between judgment and race — the least mutable, perhaps, of all our characteristics — at the same time undermines the pursuit of the intellectual and moral freedom which the humanities once made it their special business to promote. It subjects the goal of self-criticism to tighter restrictions and makes exhortations to reach it less credible. It strengthens the cynical and despairing belief that we can never see the world from any point of view but the one permanently fixed by our racial identities or escape the gravitational pull of the interests and values these create.

The same dispiriting dynamic holds, he emphasizes, when the demand for diversity focuses on ethnicity or sex.

Multiculturalism also begins with a respectable moral judgment and also ends at war with genuine learning. “Like the concept of diversity,” Kronman notes, “the idea of multiculturalism is motivated in significant part by political concerns and functions as an instrument of corrective justice. ” Specifically, multiculturalism arises out of a sense of the injustices, real

and imagined, perpetrated by the West against non-Western cultures and civilizations. The kernel of truth in multiculturalism is that an educated person, and all the more now in the era of globalization, must study and appreciate the achievements of non-Western cultures and civilizations. But it is the stronger version of multiculturalism that is influential. According to it, “the ideas and institutions of the West, and the works that embody them, have no more value than those of other, non-Western civilizations.” This version is itself often motivated by, and occasionally slides into, the still stronger view that liberal democracy in America is uniquely vulgar, dangerous, and unjust.

The dominant version of multiculturalism, Kronman shows, misunderstands the connection between education and tradition and promulgates warped opinions about the culture of the West from which it springs and from which it derives its moral appeal. Multiculturalism demands at least equal time in the classroom for Western and non-Western civilization. However, humanities education consists in large measure in studying the “internally continuous conversation” in which great writers — Plato and Hobbes, Shakespeare and Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Socrates — debate the purpose and value of life. Of course, non-Western civilizations have their internally continuous conversations. But the very condition for learning about the faraway and foreign is understanding one’s own situatedness, so it makes sense for our universities to begin with and place at their core the conversation which constitutes the civilization of which they are a part.

It makes sense for another reason. Contrary to the tenets of multiculturalism, the moral and political principles of Western civilization have increasingly and rightly come to be accepted as the proper basis for global civilization:

The ideals of individual freedom and toleration; of democratic government; of respect for the rights of minorities and for human rights generally; a reliance on markets as a mechanism for the organization of economic life and a recognition of the need for markets to be regulated by a supervenient political authority; a reliance, in the political realm, on the methods of bureaucratic administration, with its formal division of functions and legal separation of office from officeholder; an acceptance of the truths of modern science and the ubiquitous employment of its technological products: all these provide, in many parts of the world, the existing foundations for political, social and economic life, and where they do not, they are viewed as aspirational goals toward which everyone has the strongest moral and material reasons to strive.

By rejecting these realities, multiculturalists have become the most authentic reactionaries at our universities.

In treating the West as no better, and in many cases quite a bit worse, than other civilizations, they also discredit themselves in students’ eyes. For though Western civilization has committed its share of injustices, students can’t help but notice when they leave the classroom the priority of Western moral and political principles in global civilization.

Consequently, Kronman observes, “the classroom in which they are denied or disparaged is covered with a pall of self-deception, of disingenuous pretense, and thereby loses its credibility as a forum for the discussion of the deepest questions, which always demands the greatest candor and the courage that candor allows. ”

Constructivism is the third pillar of political correctness. It, too, has a modest and defensible version; namely, that perspective and the operations of the human mind play a role in forming the intellectual frameworks through which we understand. However, the extreme version, which has become a commonplace in the humanities, proclaims that the world is a human artifact. And it emphasizes that our moral and political principles are nothing but interpretations constructed by our passions and interests and imposed on the world to achieve control over events and over others. Like diversity and multiculturalism, constructivism springs from and is intended to vindicate respectable moral opinions — that values are plural and that arbitrary authority is unjust. Indeed, constructivism provides direct theoretical support for multiculturalism insofar as it suggests that all moral and political principles are equally rooted in the quest for domination.

But like multiculturalism and diversity, constructivism is an unstable idea. Particularly in the crude form that contemporary humanities professors champion, it subverts the study of history, literature, art, and philosophy by extinguishing the freedom such study was meant to serve:

Constructivism condemns the idea of intrinsic value as a false “essentialism.” It derides the notion of a fixed set of perennial options for living. It mocks the idea of a great conversation. It urges us to liberate ourselves from these primitive and freedom-denying beliefs. But once we do, no limits remain on the possibilities to be explored. The very idea of a limit becomes suspect and any attempt to reimpose one is likely to seem an arbitrary exercise of brute power.

If constructivism is true, then no history, literature, art or philosophy is worth studying because it all reflects false necessity and arbitrary power, all the way down. And therefore, once again, nothing is true and everything is permitted.

For all his criticism of the humanities, it is the successful part of the university, according to Kronman, that is the cause of the deepest problems that afflict contemporary America.

The natural sciences and, to a lesser but significant extent, the social sciences are healthy, he says, deriving their confidence, prestige, and authority from their genuine contribution to the advancement of knowledge and the satisfaction of our desire to understand. However, following a path cleared by Martin Heidegger, Kronman argues that the common identification of the sciences with ever greater control of the world — and the tremendous material prosperity that technological mastery has made possible — fosters the illusion that

we can overcome all limits and causes forgetfulness about those aspects of life that cannot be counted, measured or weighed. This illusion, he maintains, pervades our secular civilization and has provoked a spiritual crisis.

The rise of such diverse religious movements as evangelical Protestantism in America and militant Islam worldwide, and the continuing global vitality of Catholicism, represent, according to Kronman, a response to our civilization's "crisis in meaning." These religions, Kronman emphasizes, rightly understand that we must recover an appreciation of human limits and the grounds of human dignity. Thus, they display a truer grasp of our predicament than is displayed by the "cosmopolitan observers, especially in our colleges and universities" who tend to view religious faith with "smugness," "bemusement," and "scorn." But no religion can provide the answer we need, Kronman uncompromisingly insists, because all religion is fundamentalist in the decisive sense that it relies on beliefs it places beyond question. Our aim, therefore, should not be to reestablish God's dominion but to restore our understanding of our own humanity. In the face of this great challenge, Kronman dramatically proclaims that only our universities can save us now.

Despite the grim picture he paints, Kronman concludes on an optimistic note. For the humanities, he believes, are capable of restoring our appreciation of the grandeur and the limits of the human condition. And it is not too late to restore the humanities. Indeed, "the prospects seem brighter at the present moment than even a decade ago." This is because questions about the meaning of life are increasingly forced out into the open by "the rising tide of religious fundamentalism." In addition, the culture of political correctness, Kronman judges, has become stale and disreputable. And, as evidenced by the enthusiasm he has observed in his students in the Directed Studies Program at Yale and which others have observed in students at other universities offering core humanities programs, young men and women, Kronman asserts, welcome the opportunity to explore the treasures of history, literature, art, and philosophy with teachers capable of lighting their way. What is needed, he counsels, is not the rejection of the research ideal but to constrain its "imperial sprawl," which not a few professors in the humanities, he suspects, would greet as liberation.

In fact, a great deal more will be needed than Kronman recognizes. For all of its virtues, his philosophically sophisticated and historically grounded brief on behalf of the humanities is not without its flaws. Attention to these flaws helps bring into focus the daunting challenges to educating the university about its mission.

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First, Kronman does not squarely confront the institutional obstacles to reform. Currently, as his analysis implies, the criteria for hiring, promotion, and tenure in the humanities and the incentives governing advancement in the profession reflect an incoherent commingling of the

research ideal and the culture of political correctness. Until our universities alter the criteria and provide effective incentives, they will not train professors interested in or capable of teaching courses that introduce students to the conversation about how to live well that constitutes Western literary and philosophical tradition.

Second, Kronman obscures one key consequence of the culture of political correctness. Questions about the meaning of life have not been banished from the humanities, as he suggests. It is more accurate to say that genuine inquiry into the fundamental alternatives has been banished in favor of the promulgation from lecterns and seminar tables of a single right answer. We have entered, in other words, a new age of piety, but in this one our educators present themselves as radically open to all human possibilities even as they drastically curtail the domain of humane inquiry. In our new age of piety, humanities professors often direct students to embrace an understanding of life's meaning that is cosmopolitan, in favor of greater government efforts to redistribute wealth, pro-choice, pro-affirmative action, pro-same-sex marriage, often anti-American, and generally indifferent to or disdainful of tradition and religion. In other words, Kronman substantially understates the extent to which classes in the humanities, far from abandoning the question of the meaning of life, seek to indoctrinate students with a dogmatic and intolerant progressivism.

Third, Kronman overlooks the contribution of the law schools, no small part of the contemporary university, to reproducing the politically correct university. Law schools are governed by the research ideal and have long been bastions of political correctness, and their faculties have, for decades, been churning out arguments and devising policies to advance the cause. Law schools inevitably shape the sensibility of their students, many of whom go on to occupy positions of power and influence in social and political life, including at our universities.

Fourth, notwithstanding his acknowledgement that religion offers a deeper insight into the contemporary spiritual predicament than does our secular professoriate, Kronman inflammatorily characterizes all religions as fundamentalist and dogmatically dismisses them all as ultimately wrongheaded. Here he more or less faithfully follows Weber, but in so doing Kronman purports to know what he cannot, is unfaithful to the pluralism and skepticism at the heart of the ideal of secular humanism, and betrays the "interpretive generosity" that he stresses must characterize humane studies.

Fifth, and subsuming the others, Kronman's analysis of the university is insufficiently political in the broad sense. This derives from his decision to understand universities and their mission from the perspective of secular humanism rather than from that of the liberal tradition and liberal education. Partly as a result, he does not recognize the extent to which our universities and the liberal education to which they ought to be devoted are products of liberal democracy and ought to serve liberal and democratic ends. Fortunately, liberal education serves liberal and democratic ends by remaining true to its highest ideals, which means, among other things, protecting the classroom from politicization. Students must be

free to read, discuss, and write without pressure to conform to the party line. Liberal education, however, is not closed to political thought. To the contrary, it welcomes conservative as well as progressive points of view. From such an education students learn lessons in toleration and moderation that will serve them, and the liberal democracies of which they are citizens, well.

Accordingly, the restoration of liberal education should provide a common ground on which conservatives and progressives of good will and understanding can come together.

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